

NEW JERSEY DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**REPORT
ON
CHARTER
SCHOOL
HEARINGS**

April 24, 2001

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This analysis of the testimony received as a result of the public hearings held in March, 2001 on the charter school program in New Jersey is the first part of a legislatively required evaluation of the implementation of the Charter School Program Act of 1995.

During the three public hearings held, charter school constituents came out to speak or sent in written testimony comprising 85.3% of the total testimony given. Overwhelmingly, they spoke of their satisfaction with their schools. Parents, students, teachers, and administrators addressed common issues in several areas, and particular issues in others:

	TEACHERS	PARENTS/STUDENTS	ADMINISTRATORS
Class Size	X	X	X
Teaching Methods	X	X	X
Teacher Attention	X	X	X
Safety	X	X	X
Funding	X	X	X
Professional Development	X		X
Relation to Administration	X		X
Parental Involvement Appreciated	X	X	X
Curriculum	X	X	X
Ability to Affect Decision making	X	X	

These issues were cited with greater frequency than others and so are included in this table, with a complete listing included in the body of the report.

The remaining 14.7% of respondents represented parents and staff from districts, Board of Education members, teachers' associations, and other groups such as the Education Law Center and the Citizens to Preserve Public Education. Their concerns were varied and particular to each group. Most of the testimony from these groups focused on:

- Funding issues
- Staffing problems due to teachers leaving a district school to teach in a charter school
- Returning students and how to handle the scheduling and curriculum alignment problems
- Suggestions for mandating a student's length of stay in a charter school
- Suggestions for revisiting the criteria for where a charter school may be located.

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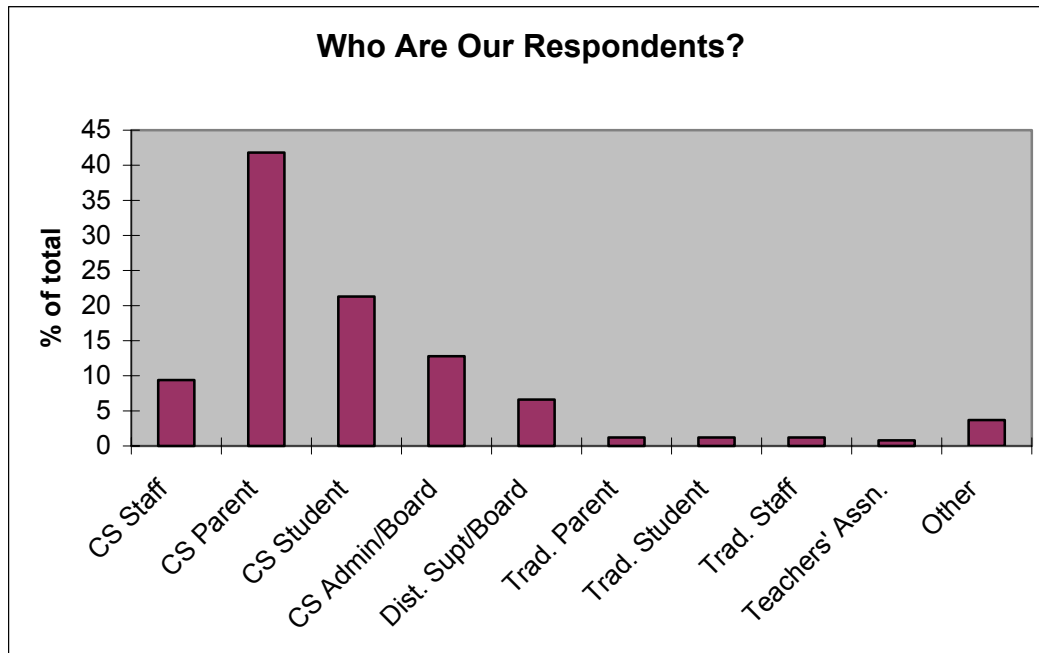
The Charter School Program Act of 1995, as amended on November 2, 2000, requires that the Commissioner hold public hearings by April 1, 2001 to hear input on the charter school program. These hearings have resulted in testimony, both oral and written, from representatives of the charter schools, traditional public schools, and independent groups such as the Education Law Center, Citizens to Preserve Public Education, and others. This is one component of an independent evaluation of the New Jersey Charter Schools Program. A database of all respondents and their affiliations is available.

The purpose of this testimony evaluation is not to prove or disprove any particular hypothesis, but to improve the understanding of issues involved in the charter school initiative. After reviewing all of the testimony, the respondent groupings and main themes were well defined. The matrix below represents the number of times that the themes were mentioned by each group:

Main Themes and Number of Times Mentioned for Each Respondent Group

	GOVER	FUND	PAREN INVOL	REG OVER	STUD ASSESS	STUD ACHIEV	STAFF	ACCOUN	CURRIC	TOTAL
CS staff	1	7	11	1	8	11	16	1	7	63
CS parent/ student	1	38	63	2	29	86	29	11	21	280
CS Admin/ Board	2	21	21	4	17	19	14	9	12	119
District Supt/Board	2	10	1	1	1	2	3	0	1	21
Traditional parent/ student	1	5	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	8
Traditional staff	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	4
Teachers' Association	1	2	0	2	2	0	1	0	0	8
Other	0	8	1	4	1	2	2	2	1	21
Totals	8	91	98	17	59	120	65	24	42	524

In looking at the categories of respondents, charter school parents and students have been separated, although for purposes of designation in the database, they have the same code. The same is true of the traditional parent/student designation.



RESPONDENTS	%	Number
CS Staff	9.4	23
CS Parent	41.8	102
CS Student	21.3	52
CS Admin/Board	12.8	31
District Supt/Board Member	6.6	16
Traditional Parent	1.2	3
Traditional Student	1.2	3
Traditional Staff	1.2	3
Teachers' Assn.	0.8	2
Other	3.7	9
Totals	100	244

The themes are further segmented into sub-themes with the frequency of occurrence noted for each.

Frequency of each issue:

Governance (8 total)

Decision-making processes	1
Make-up of governing board	2
Procedures to select governing board	1
Private entities, management companies	1
Impact on program	1
Other	2

Funding (125 total)

Effect on nonacademic services	12
Effect on school facilities	57
Compliance with guidelines for federal, state, local, and grant revenues	3
Abbott funding	16
Transportation costs	3
Effect on surrounding districts	19
Other	15
Petitions for funding are listed and counted separately	

Parental Involvement (154 total)

Choice to attend charter school	35
Waiting lists as a measure of demand	8
Involvement in decision making	49
Satisfaction with reports of student progress	8
Taken satisfaction survey	1
Before / after school programs for parents / students	12
Feeling of family / community at charter schools	35
Other	6

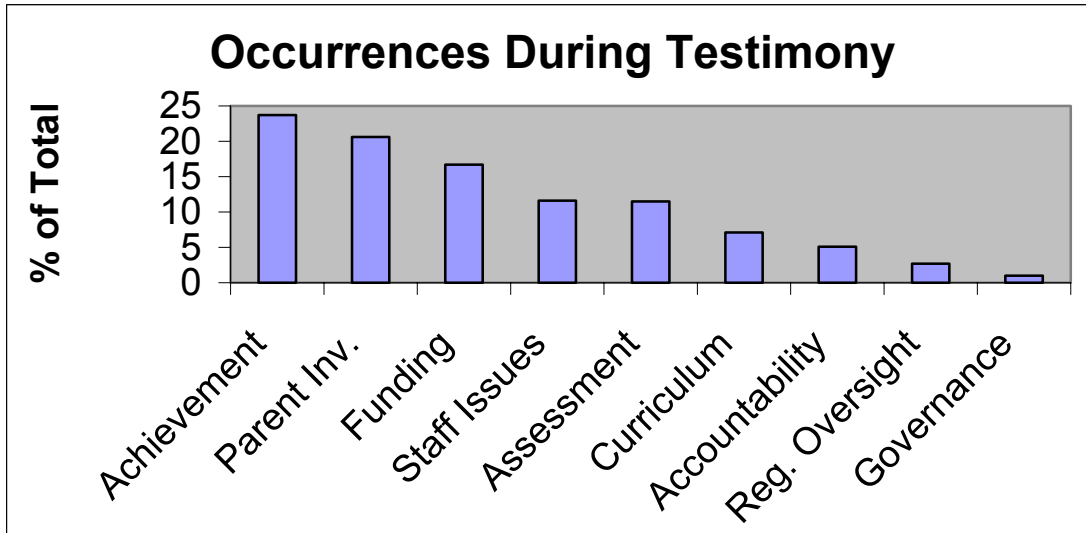
Regulatory Oversight (20 total)

Special education	1
Technical assistance given by DOE	3
Oversight / program reviews	4
Return of students to district schools	6
Other	6

Student Assessment	(86 total)	
Compared to district		6
Compared to state		1
Methods of assessment		11
Class size		50
ESPA		7
GEPA		6
HSPA		1
Other		4
Student Achievement	(177 total)	
Transition to charter school		2
Indicators promoting learning		
Attendance		3
Retention		2
Support Programs-academic		15
Teacher Attention		47
Extracurricular activities		1
Discipline		13
Demographics		11
Feeling of safety in school		21
Student attitude toward learning		25
Extended school day / year		17
Other		20
Staff	(87 total)	
Standards of professional development		8
Ability to influence classroom and school policy		8
Benefits and salaries		2
Credentials		3
Student / teacher ratio		4
Training for technology		1
Innovative methods		33
Sharing methods, practices with districts		4
Relationship to administration		6
Availability of instructional materials		6
Non-teaching responsibilities		6
Union issues		1
Effect of teachers leaving for charter schools on public school districts		3
Support staff		2

Accountability	(38 total)	
State requirements		3
Program Review		4
CAP		4
Probation		4
Effect on education reform, district programs		11
Adherence to state standards		5
Administrator accountability		1
Increments tied to performance		1
Other		5
 Curriculum	 (53 total)	
Special education, LEP have access to core curriculum		9
Use of technology		5
Core curriculum standards		19
Interdisciplinary curricula		4
Multi-age class		5
Performing arts		1
Other		10

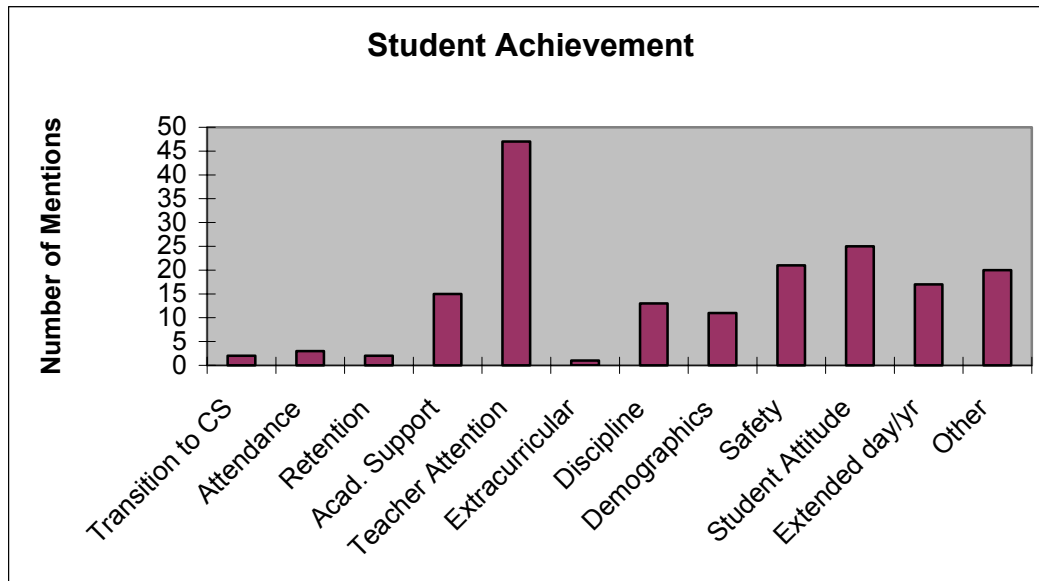
The percentage breakdown for these issues:



Issue	%
Achievement	23.7
Parent Involvement.	20.6
Funding	16.7
Staff Issues	11.6
Assessment	11.5
Curriculum	7.1
Accountability	5.1
Reg. Oversight	2.7
Governance	1
Total	100

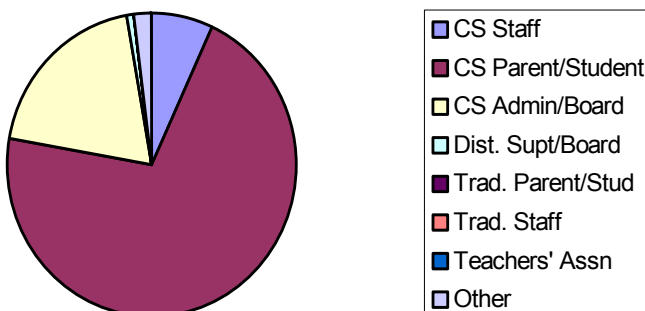
I. Student Achievement

The issues involved in student achievement are better understood by looking at what was discussed and who discussed it. The charts that follow show that charter school parents, students, and staff felt that the support programs, extra teacher attention, safety in the schools, and extended time in school all contribute to higher levels of student achievement. Many parents and students mentioned safety in the schools as an important factor contributing to increased learning. An improved attitude toward learning and wanting to go to school were mentioned repeatedly.



	<u>Frequency of Mention</u>
Transition to CS	2
Attendance	3
Retention	2
Acad. Support	15
Teacher Attention	47
Extracurricular	1
Discipline	13
Demographics	11
Safety	21
Student Attitude	25
Extended day/year	17
Other	20
Total	177

Number of Responses by Affiliation Student Achievement



Student Achievement Frequency of Mention

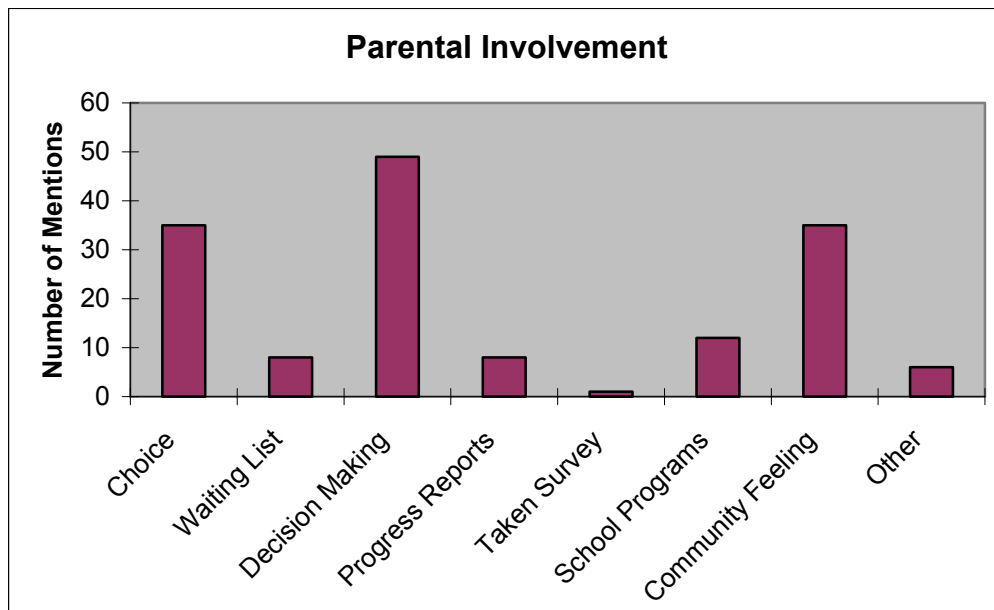
Charter School Staff	14
Charter School Parent/Student	131
Charter School Admin/Board	28
District Supt/Board	1
Traditional Parent/Student	0
Traditional Staff	0
Teachers' Association	0
Other	3
Total	177

Over a quarter (26.6%) of the discussion was focused on the attention teachers give to students in charter schools and how this affects learning. Some of the issues cited under “other” include:

- service learning programs in some schools
- charters have an inclusive setting
- the student focused programs need time to grow and so do the charter schools
- many parents and students expressed the wish that their schools could expand to include high school years

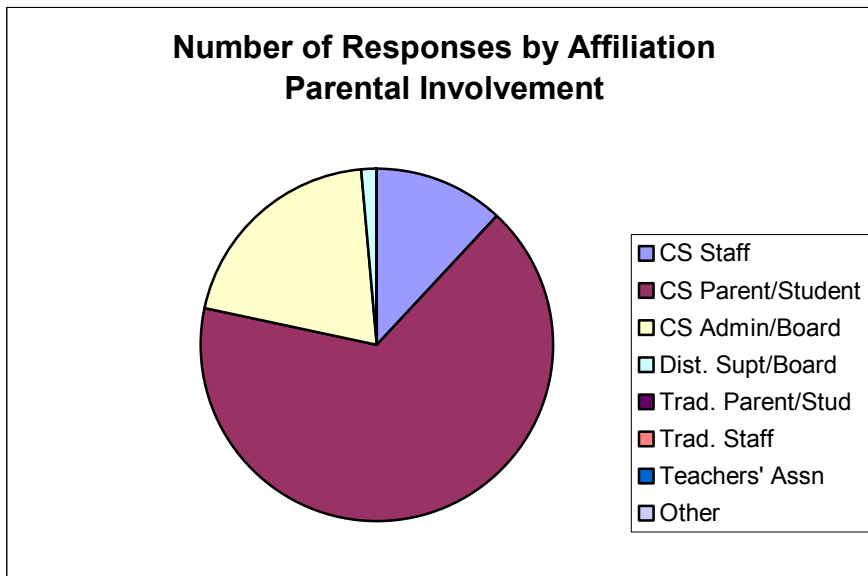
II. Parental Involvement

This issue was addressed mainly by charter school constituents (98.7% of responses) and their responses really help to define the form and magnitude of parental involvement in the charter schools. Many parents had children in non-charter schools prior to enrolling them in a charter school, and for some this is the first school of any kind that their children have attended. Overwhelmingly, parents want to choose the school that their children will attend, particularly in districts where it is perceived that the educational system is failing or there is a safety issue. Parents feel that they have a part in their children's education through their own participation in the school and through homework that requires parent participation. Volunteering in the classroom, acting as lunch monitors, working in the school, all give parents a feeling of ownership, participation, and a willingness to help direct and contribute to fulfilling the mission of the school. A sense of "community" was also mentioned frequently. All charter school constituents felt that the schools provide a welcoming atmosphere (" everyone knows everyone else") and this makes the school an inviting place to be for everyone involved. Several parents mentioned this atmosphere as contributing to their willingness to take part in the programs offered by the school for them and their children.



Frequency of Mention

Choice	35
Waiting List	8
Decision Making	49
Progress Reports	8
Taken Survey	1
School Programs	12
Community Feeling	35
Other	6
Total	154



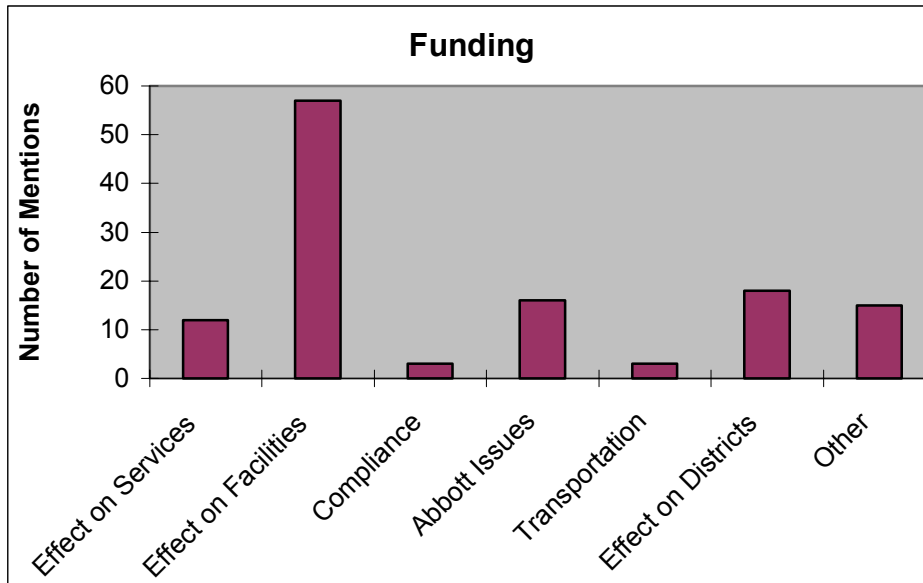
Parental Involvement <u>Frequency of Mention</u>	
Charter School Staff	17
Charter School Parent/Student	108
Charter School Admin/Board	27
District Supt/Board	2
Traditional Parent/Student	0
Traditional Staff	0
Teachers' Association	0
Other	0
Total	154

The issue discussed under “other” was the effect on the Hoboken community of the projects and programs started by the charter schools in Hoboken.

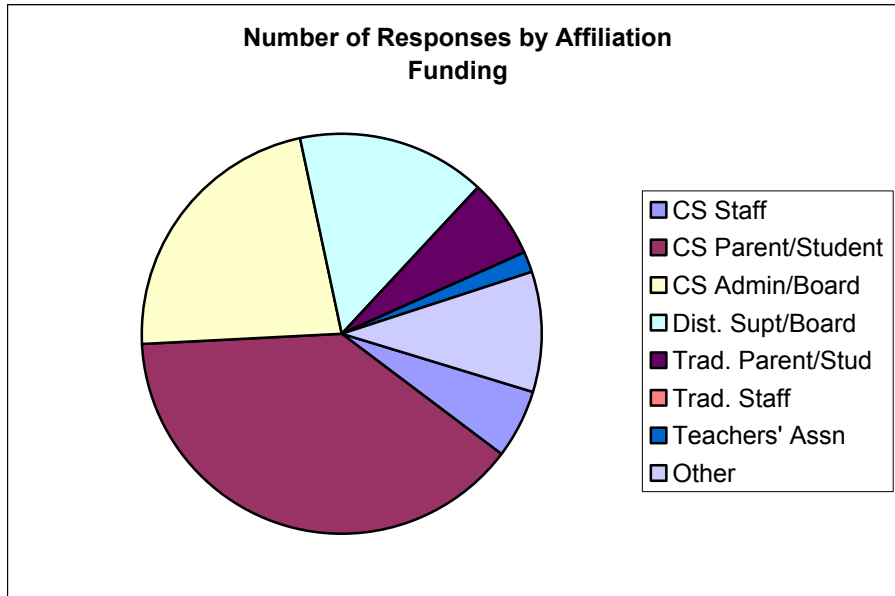
III. Funding

The lack of access to facilities funding gives charter schools an implementation obstacle not faced by districts. Charters have building and leasing costs not incurred by other schools. Many of the charter school populations increase by at least a grade a year according to the way many of the charters are set up and so they need to search for new space often. Some schools have no gym, no kitchen, or no lunchroom. Some share space with another school or business.

The issue of funding in general and facilities funding, in particular, dominated the testimony of those who addressed funding. The funding mechanism is perceived as inequitable by both charter school constituents and by the districts. An examination of who addressed the funding issue shows that charter school constituents represent 72.5% of this group. Much of their testimony spoke to the need for facilities funding (46% of the funding responses) and the need for Abbott funding to be distributed to the charter schools.



	<u>Frequency of Mention</u>
Effect on Services	12
Effect on Facilities	57
Compliance	3
Abbott Issues	16
Transportation	3
Effect on Districts	19
Other	15
Total	125



	<u>Frequency of Mention</u>
Charter School Staff	7
Charter School Parent/Student	49
Charter School Admin/Board	28
District Supt/Board	19
Traditional Parent/Student	8
Traditional Staff	0
Teachers' Association	2
Other	12
Total	125

This issue of funding elicited wide-ranging comments and recommendations, including:

- The state should find a way to fund charter schools
- Charter approval should be a district matter
- Charter schools are made to wait for funding due to them by the districts
- Enrollment losses affect districts tremendously
- There is a great financial impact on districts

- Charter schools should be required to have a facility CO at least three months before opening
- Charter schools use every dollar wisely and show fiscal accountability
- The criteria for opening charter schools need to be evaluated
- Charter schools should not be allowed to open in districts that are deemed successful academically
- Charter schools should not be viewed as competitors to the district schools

Several petitions were presented supporting facilities funding. These are listed in the database as separate petitions, noting the number of signatures of each:

	<u>Number of Signatures</u>
North Star Academy Charter School	71
Teaneck Community Charter School	79
Red Bank Charter School	76
Elysian Charter School	81
Hoboken Charter School	52
Granville Charter School	42
Pleasantville Charter School	124
Galloway Charter School	169

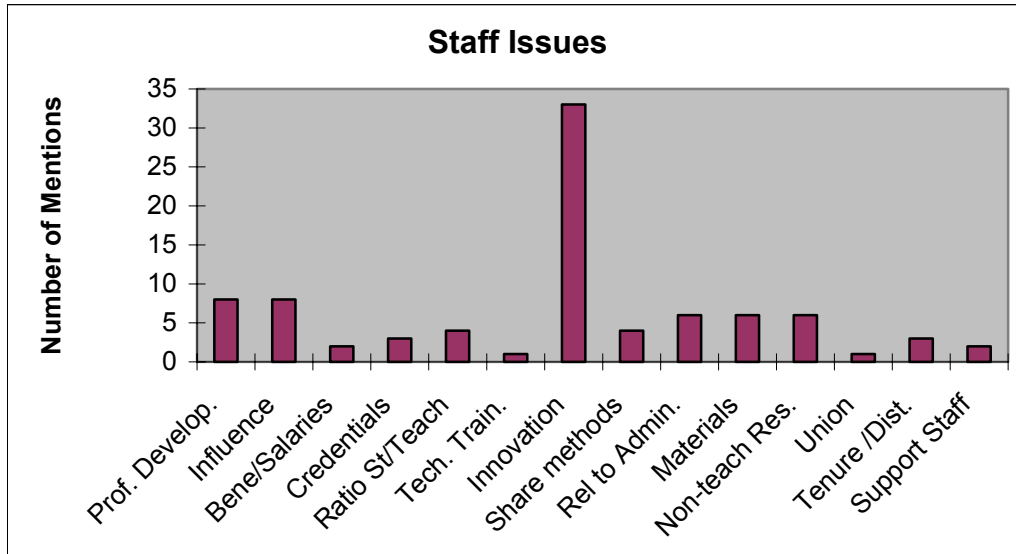
The total number of signatures collected on these petitions was **694**, making this the issue of greatest concern during these public hearings.

IV. Staff Issues

Charter school teachers represent 9.4% of the respondents. Teachers cited an appreciation of the flexibility they experience in the charter schools, their ability to focus more on students, the good relation between administration and staff, a feeling of faculty support and collegiality, and their ability to institute innovative methods (25.3% of teachers' responses mentioned this). The small class size and degree of parental involvement also makes their job easier.

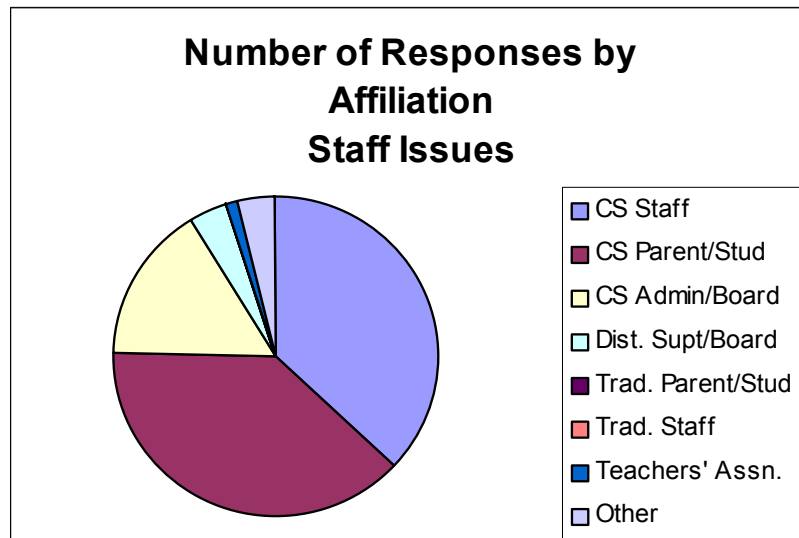
Some cited the longer hours and extra responsibilities, including having to make home visits to students before the beginning of the school year. Charter school parents and students also commented on staff issues, most often citing their appreciation of the innovative classroom methods developed and used by the staff. District superintendents

and board members were most concerned with the effect of teachers leaving the districts to work in charter schools, and the cost of hiring and mentoring replacements for what may be only a temporary position.



Frequency of Mention

Professional Development	8
Influence on Policies	8
Benefits/Salaries	2
Credentials	3
Ratio St/Teach	4
Technology Training	1
Innovation	33
Share methods	4
Relationship to Admin.	6
Materials	6
Non-teaching Responsibilities	6
Union	1
Tenure /District	3
Support Staff	2
Total	87



**Staff Issues
Frequency of Mention**

CS Staff	33
CS Parent/Student	33
CS Admin/Board	13
District Supt/Board	3
Traditional Parent/Student	0
Traditional Staff	0
Teachers' Assn.	2
Other	3
Total	87

The remaining themes will be summarized through discussion of the emerging issues only because of the smaller frequency of occurrence.

V. Student Assessment

Charter school staff, parents, and administrators discussed assessment more frequently than the other groups (92.9% of responses mentioning assessment). Of all responses on assessment, the issues most mentioned were:

Methods of assessment	12.8%
Class size	58.1%

Charter school teachers (17%) and charter school parents and students (65%) cited smaller class size as a positive contributor to students' learning and assessment results. Some of the concerns about assessment:

- Students should be attending a charter school at least 14 months before inferences are drawn from resulting assessment scores
- State test results should be reported by aggregate
- Charter school students who return to district schools affect the learning of all students and may adversely affect assessment results
- Giving more money to district schools does not mean better test scores will result

VI. Curriculum

The core curriculum standards (35.8% of responses mentioning curriculum), special education (17% of responses mentioning curriculum), and other concerns (18.9% of responses mentioning curriculum) were the main focus of those who discussed curriculum. Some of the recurring comments:

- Charter schools are "whole school reform"
- Special education needs are addressed well, and the students are included in everything in the charter schools
- Parents may get involved in the IEP for their child
- Curricula were variously described as good, structured, flexible, and aligned to the standards
- There is some difficulty in hiring child study teams

VII. Accountability

Of the 38 testimony points on accountability, 28.9% addressed the effect charter schools may have on district programs and overall reform efforts. Charter school administrators felt that the probation process and program reviews were positive things to have in place. Other ideas expressed:

- Efforts at reform in the districts may be accelerated
- Districts will be forced to examine what the charter schools are doing and make some changes
- Charter schools are small, efficient, and do more with less
- A process for collaborative efforts between charter schools and districts is needed
- Charter schools should look for partnerships with colleges, businesses, and districts

VIII. Regulatory Oversight

The main focus of discussions on oversight had to do with the return of students to district schools. Thirty percent of those mentioning oversight were from district schools, teachers' associations, or other groups such as the Education Law Center. Their concerns were mainly with students who leave a charter school and return to the district schools. This group is asking for a mandate that would require a charter school student to remain in the program for at least one year. They would also like to see final enrollment figures submitted to the districts no later than April 1st. They are concerned that incorrect figures cause problems with their own projected hiring abilities, and that returning students then put a strain on an already truncated program. They would like to see a requirement that teachers who leave to teach in charters give firm notice by May 15 of the preceding academic year, so that the district can plan for new staff.

IX. Governance

A charter school director, teacher, and parent (one each) spoke to the participation afforded different groups in governance, and that the school does not have a top-down management structure. The director asked for consideration for a training program for board members. Members of the Boards of Education and the NJEA were concerned about the effect of education management companies in charter schools, in particular their representation on the boards of charter schools and the influence they may exert in decision making. There was also some concern about the boards in charter schools not being elected.

Summary

The most passionate issue for everyone was the issue of funding. Methods of funding the charter schools, facilities funding, and Abbott funding for charter schools dominated most of the discussion on funding issues, and is pervasive in discussions of other issues such as teacher tenure, programs, and the effect of charter schools on the community. Charter school constituents and district representatives alike asked that this issue be revisited. While it is obvious that charter school parents and students feel that

they are getting a good education, demonstrating it is another issue. State assessment scores, other assessment tests, student progress reports and other methods of assessment will be an important part of the evidence. Collection of this information over time will be important in determining whether or not student performance will improve in charter schools. That determination cannot yet be made, since most have been in operation for just a few years. It is too early to be precise and judge the effectiveness of the programs. Some trends, however, have emerged. The level of parental involvement in these schools makes them unique and is a factor behind high levels of student achievement. Many parents cited school choice as an important issue for them. The charter school presence as a choice for education seems to have given the public a reason to examine the need for educational improvement. These hearings and the upcoming independent evaluation will help to answer the question of whether or not charter schools are a positive vehicle for educating the children of New Jersey.